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## HUMOR REPEATS ITSELF

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There was a young man from St. Paul  
Who went to a British masked ball.  
Their mirth to provoke  
He dressed as a joke,  
But nobody saw him at all.

From Caesar and Virgil, the high-school student scarcely gets the idea that the Romans were jolly dogs who went around continually chuckling over their own jokes. Yet as one extends his acquaintance to other Latin writers it becomes evident that the above-mentioned young man would have had a different story to tell had his experience been among them. In fact many instances of so-called American humor have close parallels in the literature of Rome.

"A farmer once told Lincoln a whopping big fib about his hay crop. Lincoln, smiling his melancholy smile, drawled: 'I've been cutting hay, too.' 'Good crop?' the farmer asked. 'Fine, very fine,' said Lincoln. 'How many tons?' 'Well, I don't know just how many tons,' said Lincoln, carelessly; 'but my men stacked all they could outdoors and then stored the rest in the barn.'" Quintilian mentions, as one type of the humorous story, those where, as he says, one lie is refuted by another, and illustrates it by the reply of a certain Gabba, who, when someone had said that in Sicily he had bought for a very small sum an eel five feet long, remarked, "That's nothing wonderful; they grow so long there that fishermen use them for ropes." A man once met a friend of his, coming out of the theater after the performance, with the question, "Did you see the show?" "Oh no, I've been playing ball in the orchestra." That's another of Quintilian's stories. A farmer one morning found an automobile lying overturned in the edge of his plowed field and in a spirit of helpfulness called to

the owner who stood by it: "What's the matter? Had an accident?" "Oh no, I've just got a new car and have brought my old one out here to bury it. Could you lend me a spade? I can't dig very well with my auto horn." In spite of the twentieth-century elaboration we recognize the old motif. If you, seeing a very small boy with a very large basket, call out facetiously, "Where's that basket going with that boy?" you're repeating a type of joke as old as Cicero at least. For Macrobius has recorded that Cicero once seeing his son-in-law, Lentulus Dolabella, a very short man, girded with a long sword, asked: "Who has tied my son-in-law to that sword?" The lady who was preparing for her first trip abroad and, anxious to exhibit the erudition and culture which she especially lacked, asked in a tone of judicial consideration, "Do you say the Rhine or the Rhone? I've heard it pronounced both ways," has her counterpart in Trimalchio, the delicious invention of Petronius Arbiter. Lest his guests should assume from his being a freedman that his early education had been neglected, Trimalchio undertakes in an offhand way to display his knowledge of Homer and tells the story of the Trojan War: "Diomedes and Ganymedes were two brothers, whose sister was Helen. Agamemnon carried her off and surreptitiously substituted a hind in her place for Diana. So the Trojans and Tarentines fought together, but Agamemnon conquered, and married his daughter Iphigenia to Achilles, which drove Ajax mad, as you shall presently see." The Roman who remarked about a slave famous for his successful thieving, that he was the only slave at his house from whom he did not need to seal or lock up anything, has something in common with the New England farmer, who recommended a laborer in the following words: "This man has worked for me one day and I am satisfied." The American public today smiles over the "nonsense rhyme."

He'd scarcely laid his fortune by,  
When the stupid fellow must up and die.

"Who's that lady with you, sir?"  
"She's my wife." "By Jupiter,  
I knew she must be kin to you,  
You look so much alike, you two."

Alas why stayed he not at the sea-side?  
For while he was there, he never once died.

The sorry world is sighing now;  
Lagrippe is at the door;  
And many folks are dying now  
Who never died before.

This last is from Carolyn Wells's *Nonsense Anthology*. The other three are examples given by Cicero of what he calls *subabsurda*. The little darky who says, "All them names that you call me, you is!" is borrowing an old trick often used by the slaves in the comedies of Plautus, who delighted to turn a man's ammunition against himself. If an angry master shouted at his troublesome slave, "May the Gods destroy you!" an obsequious "After you, sir!" though apparently a soft answer, was not calculated to turn aside wrath. We are all familiar with the boy who delights to be just as impudent as he dares, and insolently to rouse the wrath of his auditor to the highest pitch only to disarm the enemy and save himself by some harmless turn at the end. A very clever illustration of this occurs in the *Miles Gloriosus* of Plautus. One slave, Sceledrus, starts to tell his partner of an adventure, beginning: "This morning when I had gone up on the roof of the house, hunting for our pet monkey . . ." Here the other interrupts him with the annoying comment, "By George, a good example of one darned thing after another!" Too angry to continue his story, Sceledrus exclaims: "Plague take you!" "You, rather, I should say," is the retort of the amused Palaestrio, who after a suitable pause completes the sentence in this harmless way, "should go on and tell the story you began." The following appeared recently in the *Boston Transcript*: "Pharaoh had just received the deputation of Nubian slaves to protest against the new hoisting machinery at the Pyramids. 'It's throwing a lot of our men out of work,' said they. 'Bury the deputation between the paws of the Great Sphinx and pour a libation to Isis,' said the ruler. 'These slaves are opposing Progress.'" Why does this amuse us? Why does it look funny when a tall, thin man walks with a short, fat one? Incongruity is at least part of the secret in each case. Noah using a telephone, Lucretia Borgia invited to a tea party—there is incon-

gruity. When Horace adds an appendix to Homer's story of the interview between the shade of Tiresias and Ulysses, and represents the venerable seer as giving advice which would be appropriate in the mouth of a very business-like and up-to-date Roman contemporary of Horace himself, it shows that he had the same notion of a joke as John Kendrick Bangs. Horace never had a chance to read *The House Boat on the Styx* in Rome, but let us hope that one copy at least has found its way to the *sedes discriptas piorum*.

Not only in the types but in the subject-matter also of our jokes we resemble the Romans. When Horace tells of the bore who insisted on accompanying him as he walked through the Forum in spite of all his polite but desperate efforts to escape, when he refers to the habit musicians have of refusing to play when asked, but of never stopping when unasked, or when he tells of the miser, desperately sick, who still demanded to know the price of his gruel before he would drink it and fell back in despair at the answer—in all these cases and in many others he is plainly within the field of our own humorists. And not Horace alone: the bald-headed man, the fat man or woman, the wearer of false hair or teeth, the borrower who never pays, the shopper who never buys, the glutton, the physician in league with the undertaker, the absent-minded professor, on all these subjects Martial, too, exercised his wit, and in Professor Nixon's excellent translation, his epigrams sound very modern indeed.

Philaenis weeps with just one eye.  
Queer, is it not?  
You wish to know the reason why?  
That's all she's got.

Caecilianus never dines  
Without a boar served whole;  
Caecilianus always dines  
With one congenial soul.

Just give Linus half what he asks as a loan;  
Then console  
Yourself with the thought that you'd rather lose half  
Than the whole.

"Quintus loves Thais." "What Thais is that?"  
 "Why, Thais the one-eyed, who—" "Who?"—  
 Well, I was aware  
 She'd lost one of her pair,  
 But I didn't know he had lost two."

The teeth of Thais look like jet;  
 Laecania's are white.  
 The cause you ask? The pallid set  
 Go out at night.  
 (The joke here is not quite so subtle in the Latin.)

Charinus, the cause of that head-wrap you wear  
 Isn't pain at your ear-drums, but pain at your hair.

Laughing at others for peculiarities in pronunciation either natural or affected is a charge to which many of us must plead guilty. The American tourist in England prizes such gems as "It's a riny dy, tody," or references to "'Enry the Heighth," from the lips of cabman or guide. The old gamekeeper who pointed out the nests of the pheasants and said, "There's where the 'ens sit on the heggs," was quite unconscious of the amusement he furnished, but the young lady who comes back from Boston and confesses that she "adoahs the Eastuhn atmospheah" is often pleased with the impression which her pronunciation must make, not realizing that one whose birthright includes the "tempestuous Western r" can never "express a feah" or "explain an idear" in the apparently inconsistent but altogether charming fashion of the New Englander "to the manner born." Catullus celebrated in immortal verse a certain Arrius, who, in order to give his conversation a flavor of Greek culture, had the habit of inserting h's, as one might say, both in and out of season. "Insidias" in his speech was "hinsidias." After his departure for Syria, however, Catullus says, "Our ears had a chance to rest and began to recover from the fear of being distressed by excessive aspiration, when of a sudden back came the horrible news that the Ionian Sea, now since Arrius had crossed it, was no longer Ionian, but Hionian!" Not-at-home stories are generally about women nowadays, but it was not always so. Nasica, it is said, once went to see the poet Ennius. When he inquired for him at the door, the servant-girl informed him that

Ennius was not at home, but Nasica noticed that she said this at the bidding of her master and that the latter was in. A few days afterward when Ennius came to visit Nasica and inquired for him at the door, Nasica shouted down that he was not at home. Then Ennius said, "What is this? Don't I know your voice?" and Nasica replied: "You are an insolent fellow. When I inquired for you, I believed your servant-girl that you were not at home, and you won't even believe me!" Do you happen to know a man, a man perhaps with whom you used to go to school when you were both boys, who now refuses to tell the truth about his age? Cicero knew such a man, by name Vibius Curius, and one day in exasperation said to him: "Then I take it, that when we used to practice declamation together, you had not yet been born." Even more familiar seems his comment on a certain lady who said that she was thirty years old: "It's true, for I've heard her say it now for twenty years." While a man is waiting for his wife to add the finishing touches to her toilet, he very seldom finds it much of a joke. But when he looks back to it afterward, or when he is commenting on the ways of women in general, or especially when it is some other man whose experience is under discussion, it seems to him very funny indeed. Men have loved to dwell on this extremely humorous factor in human life since time immemorial, and the Romans were no more the inventors of that joke than ourselves. "We speak of the man of the hour. Is there also a woman of the hour, I wonder?" "No, it takes her an hour and a half," says a recent magazine. "You know the ways of women; while they are getting ready, while they are starting, it is a year," wrote Terence, a hundred years before Cicero. Still earlier Plautus harped on the same theme: "Surely woman was born from Delay herself," he says. The story of the man who woke up after a good nap and inquired of his wife, "Are you talking again or yet?" suggests the second feminine characteristic beloved of paragraph writers. Juvenal satirizes for the amusement of the Romans the excessive volubility of the blue-stocking. In the community where this woman lives, people no longer, he says, at the time of an eclipse, ring bells and blow trumpets after the time-honored custom, to drive away the hosts of darkness that are overpowering the moon.

For, he says, her flow of conversation, unaided, is sufficient to produce the desired effect.

Two of the extant Roman writers on rhetoric have discussed at some length the various means of securing a humorous effect and the place that humor should play in an orator's speech. Their classification can be illustrated from modern humor quite as satisfactorily as from Latin literature. Cicero (in *De oratore*) makes a general division into the humor that may pervade continuously an entire speech, and brief flashes of sharp wit, like the following: When Philippus, whose public career had not been beyond charge of graft, interrupted the orator Catulus with the rude question: "What are you barking about?" the ready answer was: "Because I see a thief." That the humorous effect may depend either upon the words or upon the subject-matter itself forms the basis for a second classification. The joke may lie *in dicto* or *in re*. A joke *in re* may consist of the telling of an amusing incident (real or fictitious), the humorous characterization or description of an individual, or may be made up of exaggerated imitation of something easily recognized. So-called humorous recitations, where the speaker plays the part of one who is intoxicated, belong in this class. As Cicero says, this kind of humor belongs to the actor rather than to the orator and is to be used by the latter only moderately and with extreme caution. When a Washington lady, socially inclined, asked a congressman, "Is your wife entertaining this winter?" and the ungallant but would-be truthful spouse replied, "Not very," he gave us a modern example of the *in dicto* joke. Cicero gives several illustrations: In a Roman lawsuit, while a witness very short of stature was on the stand, the opposing counsel asked if he might propound a question. The president of the court replied: "Be brief about it." "I shall obey you there," said the lawyer, "and ask"—here he glanced at the little witness whom he desired to question—"only a very short one." As there was, however, among the jurors a man sensitive about his height and not so tall even as the witness, the lawyer's attempted joke did him no good service. When Scipio Africanus in adjusting his garland one day at a banquet was unfortunate enough to break it, his neighbor said, "No wonder it does not fit, *caput enim magnum*



*est.*" The joke that depends on a double meaning in some word or words, if spontaneous, may be exceedingly pointed, as in the story about Philippus, quoted above. It may rise to the very height of whimsical absurdity, as in the famous question put by an English humorist to a man carrying a rabbit: "Excuse me, sir, but is that your own hare or a wig?" But it is especially subject to abuse by the professional makers of jokes and often results in atrocities which need not be illustrated. Cicero suggests a test by which one may decide whether the joke rests *in dicto* or *in re*. "Express the same meaning in other words," he says, "and notice whether it still seems funny." Poor Lord Dundreary, who expected to amuse his audience by giving as an answer to the question, "When is a door not a door?" the reply, "When it is partly open," should have had his attention called to this distinction. The *in dicto* jokes, according to Cicero, may arise in two ways—either from the use of an ambiguous word or from the ambiguous use of a word. Another story quoted by Cicero illustrates the latter. A sacred statue had been mutilated one night and a young man, Titius by name, was strongly suspected. Now he was an inveterate ball player, and his companions, when they had gathered the next day as usual at the field, marveled at his non-appearance. "Oh," said Vespa Terentius, "he can't come—he has broken an arm." Whether it was his own arm or the arm of the statue was left *in ambiguo*. As another means to secure a comic effect Cicero mentions the substitution in a sentence of something entirely unexpected for that which the hearer naturally anticipates. In some cases the surprise itself is sufficient to raise a laugh—but when the unexpected portion is witty *per se*, the effect is more striking. As a modern example of the first kind we have the story of the school-boy's extemporaneous oration on the Seasons. "We have four seasons," he began, "spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Some prefer spring, some prefer summer, some prefer autumn, and some prefer winter; but as for me—give me liberty or give me death!" The second kind (i.e., where the unexpected portion is witty in itself) is well illustrated by the famous remark of Franklin to the other signers of the Declaration of Independence—when someone had said "We must all hang together," he added "Yes,

or we shall all hang separately." Cicero gives many illustrations of jokes in which the humorous effect comes from the unexpectedness of a reply. When a certain man said to Crassus, "Shall I disturb you if I come to consult you tomorrow morning before daybreak?" "Not at all," said Crassus. "Then you will give orders that you be called early, I suppose?" "No indeed, for I have just said that I should not be disturbed." According to Quintilian, Gabba happened at one time to be living in a house with a leaky roof. A friend asked for the loan of his raincoat and he answered, "I can't accommodate you, for I'm going to stay at home today."

The house of the bard Theodorus burned down.  
What an insult, O Muses, to you!  
The Gods have done wrong;  
For the credit of song,  
The bard—should have burned with it too.—Martial.

Cicero speaks also of cases where the element of unexpectedness is introduced through the change, first, of a single letter in a repeated word, or second, of a single word in a repeated clause. When a football star before a great game once answered a none-too-sanguine supporter who said: "I suppose you've got to take what comes," with "Yes, unless we make what comes," he was illustrating the former. When someone criticized the old-fashioned diction of Cato in that he had used an unnecessary preposition and asked "What's the need of *t h r o u g h*?" the angry answer was, "What's the need of *you*?" and thus is illustrated the second. A perverse determination to misinterpret what one hears often produces a humorous effect which again illustrates the *παρά προσδοκίαν* joke. The inhabitants of Terracina sent Augustus the wonderful and, as they thought, flattering news that a palm had grown up on his altar. "That shows how often you use it," said he.

A popular lecturer recently divided funny stories into three classes: (1) where the point is stated in words; (2) where the point is illustrated by some accompanying gesture, and (3) where the point must be gained by inference. As an example of the last he told the story of a man who sat fishing on the bank of a stream which ran by the wall of an insane asylum. One of the inmates looked

over the wall and said, "What have you caught?" "Nothing." "How long have you been fishing?" "Four hours." "Come inside," said the man. Several of Cicero's stories admirably illustrate this type of the point by inference. A certain Sicilian when a friend was telling how his wife had hanged herself on a fig tree said, "Won't you please give me some slips from that tree that I may plant them?" A notably bad lawyer who complained of hoarseness on the eve of his defense of a client, was advised to go home and drink a certain mixture of honey and wine. "But," he expostulated, "if I do that I shall ruin my voice!" "Better your voice than your client," was the heartless answer. Compare this with the following from the *Fliegende Blaetter*: "I certainly am sincerely indebted to you for winning my case." "By no means. I represented your opponent." "Just so." Caius Caesar said to Pomponius who displayed a wound which he had received in his mouth during the rebellion of Sulpicius and which he boasted he had received fighting for Caesar, "You shouldn't look back when you're running." Incongruity, surprise, exaggeration, and irreverence are the four qualities mentioned by Professor Phelps in discussing Mark Twain's humor. The essence, he says, is incongruity, and the others follow in their order. We have already noticed incongruity and surprise as common elements used by the Romans to produce a humorous effect. Irreverence appears in the treatment of Tiresias by Horace, in the epigrams addressed by Martial to various prominent persons, and elsewhere. Juvenal's "irreverent freedom of expression" is one element which has caused certain editors "to compare him with James Russell Lowell in the *Biglow Papers* and to describe his rather grim wit as 'the earliest known instance of American humor.'" Exaggeration too undoubtedly does as good service for Juvenal, for instance, when he is enumerating the various noises at night which render sleep impossible at Rome, as it ever did for Mark Twain. Mr. Howsanlott's guests in our Sunday supplements have no more harrowing experiences than he describes.

In short, analyses of American humor seem to apply very well to what is left of Roman humor; analyses of Roman humor can be completely illustrated from our own stories, and much of the

humorous literature of the two peoples is found to be identical, both in type and subject-matter. In addition to what has previously been mentioned, one might add this further enumeration of detail. Puns, sarcasm and irony, practical jokes, picturesque slang, and humorous situations arising from misunderstandings, self-conceit, mistaken identity, gullibility, intoxication, Christmas presents passed on, guests who outstay their welcome, men who are afraid of their wives, extravagant sons and angry fathers—all these amused the Romans long ago. Even the mother-in-law did not escape Juvenal. The temptation is strong to claim a prototype in Roman humor for every subject upon which our wits exercise their ingenuity. Yet a rather desultory investigation has happened upon no instances of the humorous treatment of hypocrisy in religion as we have in many “deacon” stories. Very conspicuous also by their absence are the numerous developments of the child motif. Is it possible that the *enfant terrible* never appeared in Roman costume?